

# A RHETORICAL APPROACH TO GREEK LIFE SCANDAL

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A Rhetorical Approach to Greek Life Scandal

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment of Requirements of the CSU Honors College in the Degree of

Department of Communications

BY

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Columbus, Georgia

2016

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the incident of Sigma Alpha Epsilon as a case study to analyze the rhetorical strategies that seek to restore an organization's public image in the face of grave public offense. This thesis demonstrates how SAE national headquarter de-emphasize the idea of "tradition" that grounds its organizational character in order to avoid generalization from the public regarding the racism demonstrated by the University of Oklahoma chapter. By doing so, SAE reconstructs its image as a national organization that was misrepresented by the inappropriate and public actions of a few members. Understanding how apology works allows us to become a better critic and consumer of news and scandals we encounter in media. In the following, there will be a review of the literature in the field of communication studies to outline the previous research that informs my analysis. Afterwards, a rhetorical analysis will be provided. Applying the theory of apology from the communication studies, there will be an illustration of the rhetorical strategies used by the SAE national headquarters representatives to face the scandal to restore its organizational image.

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## Introduction

On March 7, 2015, a video shocked the nation. It revealed malignant behavior of the Brothers of Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) at the University of Oklahoma, singing a chant in unison with the lyrics, “There will never be a ni\*\*\*\* SAE. You can hang him from a tree, but he can never sign with me” (McLaughlin, para. 5) on the way to their SAE Founder’s Day Formal. It went viral when the recorded video was sent to *The Oklahoma Daily* as well as a campus organization Unheard, which was created two years ago in response to cop brutality against minorities, most notably the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

The public reaction to the fraternity chapter’s blatant racism was instantaneous and unforgiving. An alliance of Black students organized for change within campus administration and atmosphere. Unheard immediately orchestrated a protest, involving students, media, SAE headquarters, and the President of the University of Oklahoma. The University of Oklahoma football team linked arms and marched across campus; a body of students marched with a tape over their mouths Unheard written on it. Hip Hop star Waka Flaka cancelled a concert that had been planned for SAE. He commented his Instagram page:

“All races partying have a good time and enjoying themselves together peacefully. That’s what Waka Flocka is about. For that reason, I must say I’m disgusted and disappointed in the actions of the SAE fraternity at University of Oklahoma and I will be cancelling my scheduled performance for them next month. Racism is something I will not tolerate” (McLaughlin, para. 36).

Also, the national headquarters for Sigma Alpha Epsilon shut down the chapter at the University of Oklahoma. In this context of exploding publicity and controversy, the President of the University of Oklahoma, Dr. David Boren publicly addressed the SAE brothers as follows:

"I have a message for those who have misused their freedom of speech in this way. My message to this is: You're disgraceful. You have violated every principle that this university stands for" (McLaughlin, para. 7). He gave the SAE members a three-day deadline for moving out of the house on campus.

Greek life has been around for over one hundred years and stands strong on its various traditions. Throughout the history in the United States, Greek organizations were founded to provide a brotherhood and learning environment that would help young men to become the future leaders of the country. In general, fraternities have been successful in this regard.

According to *The Atlantic*, fraternity members have been serving 85 percent of U.S. Supreme Court justices since 1910, 63 percent of U.S. presidential cabinet members since 1900, 76 percent of U.S. Senators, 85 percent of Fortune 500 executives, and 71 percent of the men in Who's Who in America. In addition, Greek life has produced 69 percent of U.S. presidents since 1877 and 24 percent *Forbes* 500 CEOs from the 2003 list (Konnikova, para. 2).

Despite the long history of contributions fraternity has made to the nation, Greek life is not flawless. Its practices have come under public scrutiny in recent years- hazing, rape, racism, violence, and alcohol abuse, to name a few in more recent public perceptions. According to a study by the University of Maine in 2008, 55 percent of students who join fraternities, sororities, sports teams or other student groups experience these negative practices (Winerip, para. 12). Furthermore, a 2000 Harvard study estimates that eighty percent of hazing deaths have involved alcohol (Winerip, para. 19). The life under the oath of fraternity often remains a secret, but the prevalence of social media technology has brought these various acts of misconduct that are committed by fraternity members more into the public light in recent years. Social media outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube help the public understand what is

going on behind closed doors of Greek communities by supplying video evidence. From scandals such as the ones involving Pi Kappa Alpha and Sigma Pi at the University of Mississippi and Phi Gamma Delta (FIJI) at West Virginia University, we have witnessed an increase of reported scandals through various media outlets. These incidences have started public skepticism toward the benefits, role, and value of fraternities as an organization in our society.

How does an organization respond to such grave misconduct? How does it recover and restore its image? Facing such a grave offense, such as the one committed by SAE, how does a fraternity reconstruct its public image and its organizational identity? While misconducts by fraternities are commonly known, little study has been done on how these organizations respond to the scandal and restore its organizational image. This thesis examines the incident of SAE as a case study to analyze the rhetorical strategies that seek to restore an organization's public image in the face of grave public offense. This thesis demonstrates how SAE national headquarter de-emphasize the idea of "tradition" that grounds its organizational character in order to avoid generalization from the public regarding the racism demonstrated by the University of Oklahoma chapter. By doing so, SAE reconstructs its image as a national organization that was misrepresented by the inappropriate and public actions of a few members. Understanding how apology works allows us to become a better critic and consumer of news and scandals we encounter in media. In the following, there will be a review of the literature in the field of communication studies to outline the previous research that informs my analysis. Afterwards, a rhetorical analysis will be provided. Applying the theory of apology from the communication studies, there will be an illustration of the rhetorical strategies used by the SAE national headquarters representatives to face the scandal to restore its organizational image.

### **Review of Literature**

From US Presidents to companies, misconduct and misbehaviors are a part of public life. How one responds to a scandal plays an important role in how public perceives the character and credibility of the person or an organization. Apology is an important practice of communication for maintaining human relationships. In 1973, Ware & Linkugel proposed a framework for examining how an individual addresses his or her wrongdoings. In this seminal work, Ware and Linkugel distinguished apology and “apologia,” defining the latter as a mode of self-defense. Apologia, in their account, is not mere expression of regrets. It is a rhetorically strategic argument aimed at defending one’s social position and reputation. Scholars have applied this framework to analyze political figures’ apologies, such as Richard Nixon’s apology over the Cambodia bombing (Vartabedian, 1985), Bill Clinton’s apology over the Monica Lewinsky scandal (Kramer & Olson, 2003), Lebron James’ Miami announcement (Brown, Dickhaus, & Long, 2012) and George W. Bush for the Abu Ghraib torture scandal (Shepard, 2009).

The four tactics in Ware & Linkugel’s (1973) theory are denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Denial is the accused telling the audience that they did not commit the action that they are being blamed for. This can be followed with the accused offering a scapegoat. Denial tends to be a lead-in for bolstering which the accuser is speaking positively about their self. It sends the message that they are a good person who is morally above what they are being accused of. Differentiation is the accuser’s attempt to distance their self from the negative situation as much as possible. Many times they will do this by explaining why there is a wrongful perception. Typically, transcendence is used last in an apology. While the others look to the past, this tactic is about looking to the future. It can be where the accuser

discusses how they will continue to move forward to improve. Each of these tactics can vary on the situation at hand as well as vary on the current reputation of the situation or the accused.

Adapting from Ware & Linkugel (1973), Benoit identifies 5 rhetorical strategies that are used in organizational apologia. The first is denial, which has the same use as Ware & Linkugel's. The second is evasion of responsibility, which is where the accused explaining why they should not be blamed for the perceived misconduct. This tactic can be used by saying that the accused was provoked, saying lack of information was to blame, that it was an accident, or say that it was good intention with bad outcome. The third strategy is best when everyone knows the accuser is at fault, therefore the focus is lowering judgment. This is done by the accuser bolstering their positive qualities, minimizing the negativity of the view held by the general public, attacking the accuser, or offering compensation to the victims. The fourth strategy is a simple corrective action plan. It is a thought out process of how the accused will fix the ramifications of the misconduct. The final strategy is being mortified by one's actions. The accused fully admits to the misconduct that they are being judged for. They go on to explain their sorrow for the situation and side with the accusers. By extending the theory of apologia from individual to organizational practice, Benoit redefined apologia as a practice of image restoration, rather than mere self-defense.

Robert Rowland (2006) further extends the theory of apologia in organizational context. In *On Organizational Apologia: A Reconception*, Robert Rowland discusses how there are two purposes in apologia. First, he states: "the ultimate purpose of apologia is, of course, to get the individual or organization out of crisis, to return public attitudes to the place they were prior to the crisis" (p. 195). This is why the second purpose Rowland identifies is the key to utilizing apologia. Rowland (2006) has explained that the second purpose of apologia is to instill a new

public image that highlights positive qualities of the organization. These apologia studies have ranged from topics such as politics, sports, and business. In fact, many scholars in the field of communication have studied apologies as a way to restore public perception, ranging from the US President to international corporations such as Toshiba having information disclosed that they were illegally selling materials to the Soviet Union (Hobbs, 1995) as well as Johnson & Johnson with their Tylenol crisis (Benoit & Lindsey, 1987).

Interestingly, very little studies have been done on the apology practices in relation to the racism scandal. Racism has a long history in the United States, and scandals about racially discriminatory communication continue to stir the public. In 2010, for example, Mel Gibson was caught on a video uttering anti-Semitic statements. In 2006, Michael Richards, a comedian who plays the role of Kramer in Seinfeld show, had to issue an apology for his racial rant. A southern cook show celebrity Paula Deen has also had to issue a public apology when racist actions came to light. Yet, few studies have been done on apologies issued in response to racial scandals

### **Analysis**

Shortly after the video scandal, the SAE headquarter issued an official statement of apology on to the media. While responses on the incident can be found on the official SAE site, the official media apology statement can be found on websites such as KOCO-TV (2015). In order to understand the rhetorical strategies embedded in this official apology, it is important to first analyze the situation at hand. Lloyd F. Bitzer (1968) presents a way to analyze situation and their responses with his rhetorical situation theory. He defined rhetorical situation as “a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence that can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (Bitzer,

p.6). He identifies three components of rhetorical situation. The first is exigence – what is at stake in the face of the scandal. Since there must be people who are influenced by the act of communicating one's regrets, the second element of rhetorical situation is audience. A rhetorical audience consists of people who can be influenced and as a result, is active in the change prompted by the rhetoric. The final element is constraints which is anything that limits the opportunity and shapes the availability of choices to the speaker, such as beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, and motives. Theses are any part of the situation that have some factor which can hinder the decision and actions of the audience changing their current deposition on the exigence. The rhetor then addresses these with their personal character, logical proofs, and their style.

In order to be persuasive, the rhetor must instill a call for character into the speech that engages the audience to want to be part of the change. This is achieved through word or actions. In the process of understanding rhetorical situation, it is important to remember that, "It is a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection" (Bitzer, p.4). This underlines the importance of using apologia correctly. A successful rhetoric must not be centered on giving replies to what the audience says. This only leads to expected answers and therefore establishes preconceived reactions. The correctly used apologia tactics would tell the audience how/what to think and feel. This keeps the speaker in control instead of the audience.

The positive reputation of SAE as a national organization was at stake after the backlash received once the video hit the Internet. Numerous audiences such as the African-American community, SAE brothers from across the country, and University of Oklahoma students were eagerly awaiting an apologetic response from SAE national headquarters. The exigence is the blatant racism that deviates from the values of the organization. This would not be an easy task

to earn forgiveness for because of the many constraints such as the video evidence, pre-conceived negative opinions on Greek life, and the evident alcohol abuse in the video. The situation gets more difficult when it is revealed that the chant is a learned behavior that has been passed down. The apologetic response will need to address the situation, disavow the values displayed, and explain how the organization will be moving on to ensure that other chapters do not make the same mistake. This all has to be done while also implementing the perception that this actions contained in the video are not true representations of the national organization.

Racial integration has come along since the early years of the fraternities. According to their website, SAE has nationally been 20% non-white since 2013. This is stark contrast to the Divine 9 (traditionally African-American) where in 2001 there was 0% non-African-American members in 8 of their organizations. During an interview with *The Crimson White*, it was explained that, “black students do not rush predominantly white fraternities and sororities not because they can’t, but because they don’t want to” (University, p. 22). There are a variety of reasons that an African-American would have constraints for joining a historically white organization. The explicitly violent racism displayed in the SAE video serves as supporting evidence for the disinterest.

SAE national headquarters states, “This type of racist behavior will not be tolerated and is not consistent with the values and morals of our fraternity” (Official, para. 3). This was primarily towards the African-American audience. SAE is certainly not a fraternity that nationally displays racist values. The representatives from headquarters certainly want African-American college students to feel comfortable with having interest in joining their organization. This statement assured this audience that the values displayed from the video is not accepted and does not match with their own.

It was vital for the apology to ensure that a difference was going to be made moving forward. “We are hopeful that we can re-establish the Oklahoma Kappa chapter at some point in the future with a group of men who exemplify our beliefs and who serve as leaders on campus and in the community” (Official, para. 6). This statement was meant to address the University of Oklahoma audience to ensure that tensions settle down. The song displayed in the video outraged many students. Many went to social media to vent. Post included statements such as, “The OU SAE video shows how disgusting some people can be”, “that young man leading the chant in the video better get right with the Lord because people are looking for him”, and “the world is watching. Do not let them get away with this. Disband them” (Students, para. 2). The outrage was quite evident in the student’s reactions. The most alarming issue was the violence that was insinuated in some replies. Representatives from SAE headquarters addressed the students in the audience to ensure that tensions did not rise to a violent level. The lyrics in the song may have had aggressive ideas, but that does not justify physical vengeance on the young men. These quotes also serve as a reminder that audience members are going to come from different backgrounds, which will serve as a basis for their judgment. These can be backgrounds such as race or whether or not they are Greek.

SAE national headquarters made sure to mention brothers not involved in the incident as well. “We are embarrassed by this video and offer our empathy not only to anyone outside the organization who is offended but also to our brothers who come from a wide range of backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities” (Official, para. 2). Sadly, men who had nothing to do with the incident will have to pay for it. Many people in the general public will associate anyone wearing the letters SAE with the racism displayed in the video. There is sure to be some animosity felt. This organization is based off of brotherhood, which needs to be sustained on a

national level. This statement effectively addresses the brothers nationwide by apologizing to them.

The identity of SAE nationally cannot be misconstrued with that of the University of Oklahoma chapter. “We have more than 15,000 collegiate members across the nation, and this incident should not reflect on other brothers because this type of hateful action is not what Sigma Alpha Epsilon stands for. This is absolutely not who we are” (Official, para. 3). This part of the apology was meant to be a defense of one audience to the others. There are thousands of SAE members paying attention to this apology because they are unhappy with the racist values that were displayed. This statement did a good job of doing that, but more importantly, it differentiated the other SAE members from the hate of the other audiences.

Bolstering was displayed in the apology when the SAE national president stated, “I was not only shocked and disappointed but disgusted by the outright display of racism displayed in the video” (Official, para. 5). This was intended to make him look better in the eyes of the audience. He wanted them to understand that his morals as the man in charge of the organization did not line up with those demonstrated in the video. This statement bolsters by differentiation by dividing a clear line between the SAE brothers in the video and the rest. The unhappy audiences will have a bolstered opinion of the speaker because they are being agreed with. The actions in the video are explicitly called racist and condemned.

The audiences then begin to have sympathy for the speaker once mortification is seen in the statement “we are embarrassed by this video and offer our empathy not only to anyone outside the organization who is offended but also to our brothers” (Official, para. 2). Many audience members from the African-American community are enraged by the actions of the Oklahoma chapter. They felt insulted and threatened. This display of mortification serves as a

reminder that African-Americans were not the only ones degraded after the release of the video.

The name of a proud and reputable organization was also tarnished within these lyrics. This creates a bond between the speaker and audience. This connection lowers tension and judgment.

Differentiation was seen in the official apology when headquarters said that “Although Sigma Alpha Epsilon regrets the closure, we believe members must be held responsible for their actions. We are hopeful that we can re-establish the Oklahoma Kappa chapter at some point in the future with a group of men who exemplify our beliefs and who serve as leaders on campus and in the community” (Official, para. 6). This completely cut ties with the individuals that committed the actions so headquarters does not have any relation to them. It is said that actions speak louder than words. By expelling these men out of the fraternity, it differentiates what type of man is and isn’t acceptable in SAE. While differentiation focuses on the past, the final tactic looks to building for a better future.

Transcendence was used with the application of a correction action plan, but failed in going into enough detail by not addressing the restraints. Sadly, this was the most underutilized of the four apologia tactics. This was most likely due to the fact that they had not established anything that was planned out enough to release to the general public. It also means less time that they have to speak and be done with the embarrassment.

They could transcend the negative situation by discussing the positive actions that this chapter has done. Then they relate the values of those actions to how they align to what the fraternity stands for. This would help with the constraint of many people’s misconception and disdain for Greek life (many people that fall in this category have various reasons why). It would serve as an informational moment for some and a reminder for others that fraternity members do not just party, they further the interests of the community around them.

## Discussion

SAE national headquarters was forced to deal with the ramifications of an unfortunate incident due to the mistakes of a select group. The words contained in the video were both cruel and aggressive. The majority of the public matched these emotions in their response. It was mainly due to the violence insinuated by both sides that SAE national headquarters was forced to rush in getting an official apology submitted to the media. This hurried process is quite evident in the initial media apology that was published. Despite the hurried process, SAE national headquarters still reconstructed its image after being misrepresented by the inappropriate and public actions of a few members.

Apologia tactics such as differentiation and mortification were effectively used to help the reputation of SAE national headquarters. They did an effective job of explaining how the men seen in the video represent a fairly autonomous chapter. While they do belong in the same fraternity, the values displayed do not represent what the national organization stands for. Mortification was seen as a genuine response. It was clear that the representatives were disgusted by the actions depicted in the video. They shared in the audience's hatred of the message being sent. The excellent use of these tactics helped make the representatives for SAE national headquarters look like moral men who truly disavowed what was seen on the video.

On the other hand, many apologia tactics were not utilized to help gain respect for the organization itself or the chapter at fault. A corrective action plan was mentioned, but only briefly. A thorough initiative was published on the SAE national headquarters website days later which certainly did the job that the media apology should have. This was the mistake that came from producing a rushed response. Granted, a quick response was needed, but the organization should have taken more time to prepare. There should have also been the presence of bolstering

for both the national organization and the University of Oklahoma chapter. This would have helped audience members that are not very informed on the overall actions of Greek organizations. It would have also gotten the audience member's minds off of the racist video.

The language of the media apology portrayed the incident as a heinous, racist criminal act. Admittedly, this is how the majority of the public felt so it helped make the representatives from SAE national headquarters look better. The media apology failed to address the cultural aspect because then it would have meant that they would need to take some blame for the actions taken. While this action may not have helped in the short run, it would have helped the long-term reputation of the organization as a whole. The representatives should have discussed the fact that the young men in the video were intoxicated and were not in complete control of themselves. While this does not excuse their actions, it does frame the situation differently. It serves as a reminder that the men in the video do not have a history of violence or racism. The actions shown in the video are the cause of alcohol abuse and a misguided culture because they represent a learned, cyclical tradition. The explicit acknowledgment of need to change Greek life cultural issue at hand would have provided an open doorway to a better future instead of a continuous cycle. The first step to fixing a problem is acknowledging that there is one.

The representatives from national headquarters should have utilized the transcendence tactic better to help the brothers of the University of Oklahoma chapter. Their reputation remained damaged after the media apology. The use of differentiation may have worked well, but that does not mean that the general public would completely forego any perceived connection between the chapter and organization. While the use of some apologia tactics helped the immediate ramifications towards SAE as a national organization, better applications could have saved the long-term reputation as well as the reputation of the men who were just a product of

the culture they were brought in. The media apology also did not do enough to bolster the image of their organization or to address the negative opinion held by those with disdain for Greek life prior to the event. In the end, the reputation of the SAE national headquarters representatives was saved, the SAE national organization reputation was mixed, and the reputation of the University of Oklahoma chapter was ruined. The reputations of each of these groups could have improved with the correct application of multiple apologia tactics within their reflexive communication.

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